Western missionaries are credited with introducing many changes to Middle Eastern societies in the 19th century. Their influence on the Ottoman state is less well known. One of the most important missionary activities was the building of clinics. Initially, they met with support and, even with the recognition of the local Ottoman officials. By the 1880s, however, the Ottomans moved to impose stricter limits on Christian missionary activities in Greater Syria and Transjordan in particular. The missionaries responded by turning their attention to the southern reaches of the Ottoman Empire, the Karak district, which still lay beyond direct government rule.

In February 1888, CMS missionaries Henry Sykes and Frederick Conner set out on a tour of Madaba and Karak to assess the prospects for mission work there. Conner was most enthusiastic. "If the CMS avails itself of the present opportunity, it will gain an undisputed footing in Karak before the Turkish authorities can get to it." Here was an opportunity for the missionary society to extend its influence. The people are only nominal Muslims, and have not the same fanaticism as Moslems of Palestine and Syria. The door for evangelization in East and West Palestine is practically closed; in the Karak district it is open.

As it turned out, the CMS only opened its mission in Karak after the Ottomans entered the town in 1893. The Latin missions had re-established their mission in Karak in 1894. The Ottoman state confronted was determined not to allow agents of foreign powers to disrupt their delicate work in Transjordan’s frontier. The Ottoman government had to provide the services which they considered necessary to work in pairs among the tribes. They recognized the dubious religiosity of the tribesmen at the Transjordan frontier. The problem was more aggravated the further one moved south. Ottoman assessments of the inhabitants of the Karak district did not differ from those of the missionaries. The governor in Damascus wrote in 1894.

"Although there are in excess of 50,000 Muslim tribesmen estimated to be living within the region of Maran [i.e. southern Transjordan, including Karak], they have long been born into savagery and ignorance of Islamic religious duties and of the observance of prayer. ... One does not encounter one man in a thousand who performs his prayers. They recognize the existence of mosques and prayer rooms it is only natural that they should abandon prayer, for even if they so desired there is no worship of places to be found."

The Ottoman response

To forestall missionary work among Muslims, the Ottoman government sought to build on the Muslim identity preserved within the region of Maran [i.e. southern Transjordan, including Karak], they have long been born into savagery and ignorance of Islamic religious duties and of the observance of prayer. ... One does not encounter one man in a thousand who performs his prayers. They recognize the existence of mosques and prayer rooms it is only natural that they should abandon prayer, for even if they so desired there is no worship of places to be found.

Ottoman Muslim Missionaries and the Transjordan Frontier

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It is regrettable that our records provide no local reactions to the Ottoman mission among the whole of Transjordan Frontier. In all probability, the Hanafi missionaries met with no more success than the Protestants in trying to impose new values on the people of Transjordan. For when, in 1910, the people of Karak revolted against the state’s centralizing initiatives, they sacked the Friday mosque along with all the other structures built by the Ottoman authorities as another symbol of representative state rule. Eugene Rogan is director of the Middle East Centre, St Antony’s College and lectures in the modern history.